It's Complicated: Empowering Friendships in Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond* and Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons*

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In the 1797 seduction novel *The Coquette*, Hannah Webster Forster's character of Mrs. Richman has this to say about friendship: "The friendships of the world are oft / Confed'racies in vice, or leagues in pleasure," (123). The quote may seem like a random thought, but to some people in the late eighteenth century, it may have been true. For context, the late eighteenth century saw the former English colony in North America fight a revolution against the mother country of England. The American Revolution officially lasted from the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 to the signing of The Treaty of Paris in 1783 (Wallace). Although the Americans did win the war, they not fight in the war on their own. They had France as their ally, first monetarily then joining the fight in 1778 (Wallace). The Americans won and the French would have their revolution in 1789 that would last a decade. In the time before the French Revolution, however, the tension between the French aristocracy and the rest of French society would increase, particularly when a book about seduction within the aristocracy was published in 1782 that depicted the aristocracy in a constant state of flux in their relationships with friends, family, or confidants. It also had a female character act so unlike what a typical female of the time would act that it probably made people anxious about having the aristocracy ruling over everyone else in France before their revolution. So, the quote from Foster probably held some truth as a reflection of the relationships the aristocracy had and why it should not be desirable.

Back in America, after spending the rest of the 1780s trying to figure out how to set up a new country run by the people and the people are trying to figure out how who they are as a society without a king or lords to rule them, they come into the 1790s in an anxiety of how they should go about their relationships to one another. The Americans were not going to help the French in their revolution, so that alliance and friendship was broken. In the meantime, the

Americans are trying not to be new monarchists or tyrants over their people, so they decided to set up a new system of marriage that made husband and wife more like partners or friends based on mutual love and compassion than the convenience of political or monetary gain in the old-fashioned marriages from Europe, as early American historian Jan Lewis writes in her article, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," "no word better summarizes republican notions of marriage than *friendship*," (707). But the Americans were still worried about how to make sure the citizens of the new republic would behave like rational people and not have women start turning into something that would make the social anxiety worse, like them acting more like a man, which is an irony to what they said they wanted out of the republican marriage. They are afraid that the nation will break up or split up before it begins to be a nation, so they must find something that will bring people together, whether it is through a new system in marriage or at lead find a coping mechanism to relieve the anxiety. The Americans found a coping mechanism in the form of seduction novels to ease the anxiety.

The seduction novel, such as Foster's *The Coquette*, was a story that usually follows the interaction of a wealthy or aristocratic man and a young, virtuous woman, the man (who may be called a "rake" or a "libertine") will seduce (in most cases rape) the woman, and thus will ruin the woman's reputation in society and one of three endings will happen to the woman: 1. The woman becomes ill and dies, 2. The woman becomes pregnant and dies after the child is born, or 3. The woman becomes pregnant and both mother and child dies. It's not a good place to be in. The fate of the villainous man depends. He could either get away, feel guilty about ruining such a virtuous woman, or get challenged to a duel in defending the honor of the ruined woman by a male family member or friend and thus dies. The woman's fate is usually set on death, the man's is more flexible. This kind of story was like an educational tool to show citizens that the old way

of being a citizen was no good, there should be a priority given for women to focus on the relationship she had with her family or her husband than her friends. It is like the Americans were getting their reassurance that if people followed these protective measures from becoming a rake and women staying virtuous and not giving into that temptation or trickery, the relationships in America would be stable, not be in flux, and the gender order would be fine.

But two authors presented friendships in an unusual way that brought people's anxieties into the forefront and confronted them about it. *Dangerous Liaisons* by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos (1782) for the French presented the idea that the aristocracy was not as stable of a system as the aristocrats that they were and the people lower than think probably figured. If their friendships could be so fluid and unstable that the only characters of the book that are relatively unscathed are two older women, then a change needed to come before all of France ruined by the aristocracy. On the other hand, *Ormond* by Charles Brockden Brown (1799) presents the possibility that the idea of there can be another way of stabilizing the state of the country if the people had stronger friendships among citizens. Because of this centering around friendship in both novels, these seduction novels strange, to say the least. A friendship/partnership of an aristocratic man and woman in *Dangerous Liaisons* and a strong and lasting female friendship in *Ormond* are not typical and is why I will argue that the line of what is considered "masculine" and "feminine" is much more fluid than originally thought or hoped for, which is why it's not only comforting for the characters to seek out companionship for this highly-anxiety inducing thought, but it shows how the characters can either fall down and be destroyed because of their friendship (*Dangerous Liaisons*) or rise up and stay intact because of their friendship (*Ormond*). The friendship in *Dangerous Liaisons* ostracizes the characters in the book, making everything

destabilized and unable to function while *Ormond* integrates the characters together while they're trying to survive in an uncertain world in the new and anxious republic.

Dangerous Liaisons (Les Liaisons Dangereuses)

1. Laclos and the Seduction Novel

Pierre Choderlos de Laclos (1741-1803) was, for the most part, a military man who set the pre-French Revolution French society on fire when his book was published in 1782. He was born into a family that recently became an ennobled, but not aristocratic, family and went into military school then joined the artillery just as the war France fought against England ended and a started thirty years of peace (Constantine xiii). Needless to say, Laclos had plenty of time on his hands to be moved around garrisons, including Grenoble. "[F]or six years, [Laclos] kept notes on various local nobilities and [probably] used them to write the novel he began in 1778…," (Constantine xiii). When the book was published, Laclos was thrown into the public as "a monster of depravity" that "[gave] other people a damaging impression of the morals of the nation in the character of Madame de Merteuil," (Constantine xiii). Some may say that the novel is an all-out war between the Vicomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil, the aristocratic partners that cause the chaos in the novel. Others may say that this could be a push for the time that women should be more educated, so they wouldn't end up either as depraved monstrous women like Merteuil or as innocent fools like Cécile. Some say he was a feminist writer, others that he really wasn't. David McCallam points out in his article, "The Nature of Libertine Promises in Laclos's Les Liaisons Dangereuses," that there is no "Law of the Father [no patriarchy or more powerful male character with a high virtue or authority]," (867), so the novel lets these characters experience their desires freely, without the overbearing threat of some law

or authority to shut them down. There was no higher authority over the characters to punish them for their loose morals or to keep them in their gendered line, like putting the Merteuil into a more submissive role that a normal woman should have been in (like Cécile). Valmont and Merteuil were the highest authority in the book since they were the aristocracy. Laclos opened the floodgate to showing a corrupt and unstable aristocracy in publishing this novel by bringing private conversations in the aristocracy more into the public stage where anyone could see in the form of the aristocrats' letters.

Dangerous Liaisons is written in a style that was very popular for its time: the epistolary novel (the letters novel). The story is written in many letters by many different people that go to specific people (or are supposed to). "A letter is a chameleon-like entity," the introduction to the Penguin edition of *Dangerous Liaisons* writes, "It may in turn be an auto-portrait, a weapon against an enemy, and instrument of mediation or manipulation, an internal monologue, a personal diary, an unconscious revelation of character, a threat or an instrument of ridicule…," (Constantine xvii). The construction of the novel reflects this invitation to be honesty that the characters put into each other through their letters since they think the friendship they have with whomever they write to is genuine. Cécile and her beau, Danceny, may be the most naively honest characters in their affection for each other and the trust they put into Valmont and Merteuil. Valmont and Merteuil are honest to each other since they are in a partnership in ruining the naïve character's relationship. But even the honesty and trust the aristocrats have dissolves rapidly eventually. It makes it more pungent when knowing these letters are supposed to be private. An outside and public audience of readers are reading them, and Valmont gives Danceny his and Merteuil's letters when he is dying from their duel and their private letters ruins Merteuil's reputation. These are then involved in the lives and matters of these characters. It

gives the readers a choice of how they're going to respond to these characters interacting with each other. Are the readers going to sympathize with one character or a few characters over the other(s)? Are they going to agree or become angry when a character does something that they either shouldn't or should not be in their character to do so? It gives the readers the power to interpret the text themselves, not a narrator or an overt message from the author himself.

Despite this promise of being able to have the power to interpret the text in whatever way the reader wants, they are at the mercy of the letters. The letters themselves usually consists of a small group of people that are revolving around themselves and their problems/hopes/fears/etc. There is no expanding outward or away from this central group of characters to get a bigger picture of what's happening in the world. "Laclos is not interested in the external natural world, but in the analysis of manners and sentiments, and in most of the novel's scenes there is an interplay of these within four walls," (Constantine xx). The reader is stuck in a gossip circle, essentially, and there is no escape from it until the end of the novel arrives and at least one person will probably be dead. Interpretive power the readers do have, but outward movement they do not. Why look outside when most of the interesting stories are happening inside the house?

Therefore, Laclos is showing how unstable the friendship the main characters, Valmont and Merteuil, have because they are ostracizing people out of their inner circle. The pair think that their friendship is strong enough to bear the weight of being each other's close confidants through a non-written contract between themselves that they could be equal in expressing their opposite sex's traits (Valmont = feminine, Merteuil = masculine), but it ends up being a fabrication or a kind of delusion between themselves. This friendship was going in a direction the people had not seen before and did not want to deal with since it went against what they

thought was right: man is rational and has self-control, women are men's inferior opposites. But the friendship is destroyed because the male patriarchy is restored, so the gender order is restored, and this friendship is not an ideal one to have.

2. Valmont: Lover or just Seducer? Just Seducer

To start things off, the Vicomte de Valmont, the male seducer of the partnership, always strives to get what he wants. Valmont is a successful seducer in aristocratic society that no one can match and no women is able to stop him once he starts his seduction on them. Except for the Marquise de Merteuil. A widower with an upstanding reputation, Merteuil was in a sexual relationship with Valmont until they stopped that pursuit and opted to being friends instead. Valmont has not been able to seduce Merteuil since she is aware of how seducers like Valmont work and is able to keep from being seduced and is a seducer herself. Valmont respects Merteuil enough to leave their friendship alone and go about his next seduction conquest when he feels like it. His next target centers around Madame de Tourvel, even though Merteuil wants him to go after Cécile Volanges in Letter 2: "And whom do you think she [Madame Volanges, Cécile's mother] has decided upon for a son-in-law? The Comte de Gercourt!... Do you [Valmont] mean to say you have forgiven him for his affair with the Intendante? [Merteuil and Gercourt were a couple when Gercourt left Merteuil for the Intendante and Merteuil started her relationship with Valmont.]," (Laclos 13). The revenge would be Valmont ruin Cécile's reputation before she married Gercourt, humiliating him with an impure bride. Valmont, however, does not want to this because of Tourvel.

One of the consistent traits Valmont has in his character is that he is very persistent in his pursuit of the virtuous and prudent Madame de Tourvel. She proves to be a challenge to Valmont

so much that she gets out of his seductive web for part one of the novel. He's so adamant about trying to seduce this woman that it gets tedious after a while. Merteuil tells him in Letter 33 that he might be losing his edge since it's taking him a long time to seduce Madame de Tourvel and/or that her virtue is stronger than his seduction techniques (Laclos 69-70). If anyone other than Merteuil told him this, he would have been emasculated and would have done something to get his reputation back up. But Valmont brushes this jab at his pride off and sees that he needs to take his time on this pursuit of Tourvel in Letter 34: "But why do you go to such lengths to prove something that everybody knows? To make rapid progress in the affairs of the heart, it is better to talk than to write. That is the whole substance of your letter… But of course! These are elementary lessons in the art of seduction," (72). They play off each other since they had an understanding that they can be whoever they want to be in their inner circle. They have the all the time in the world to do what they want and at this point in their relationship, Valmont doesn't let this deter him from keeping at his seduction game with Tourvel. Valmont knows he's going to seduce Tourvel in time, it just might take longer than usual. He just keeps charging on like the smooth and manly seducer he is.

Speaking of Tourvel, Roy Roussel's *Dangerous Liaisons* chapter in his book, *Conversation of the Sexes: Seduction and Equality in Selected Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-century Texts,* calls the relationship she and Valmont have a love story: "But their relationship soon becomes a love story in which Valmont seeks to escape the ephemerality of momentary triumphs and pleasures in the warmth of feeling," (94). First off, what? Since when is Valmont capable of love? By love, Roussel sees Merteuil defining love by "any form of the belief by men that their pleasure certifies their conventional authority and power over women" (101) because women are "[susceptible] to sensation and emotion" (99). For the case of Valmont, he "must

give himself to Tourvel… If Valmont accepts the feminine in himself [giving into sensation and emotion], if he images and reflects her surrender [to sensation and emotion], then he will discover a natural equality with her" (105). I did not see the places or the sentiments that Roussel picked up on when he wrote about his claims. Frankly, if there were places that sounded like Valmont was claiming love toward Tourvel, I took it as sarcasm or connecting further with Merteuil. It was more to get a knowing look out of each other that the pursuit of Tourvel's virtue was going to be difficult and a longer process than they, mostly Valmont, imagined. Especially since he would have a night with a prostitute and use her body as a writing desk to send a note to Merteuil (Laclos 102-103). It's not a stretch to think that Valmont's supposedly falling-in-love to Tourvel just doesn't seem possible. If anything, he should have gotten angry at some of the comments Merteuil wrote to him for trying to question his intentions (his manhood and being a good seducer). Roussel does acknowledge that there is a switch in Valmont that turns him into the seducer I saw in him. Specifically, for me, at the beginning of letter 125 in part four: "So I [Valmont)] have defeated her [Tourvel], this arrogant woman who dared to think she could resist me! Yes, my love [Merteuil], she is mine, all mine! And ever since yesterday there is nothing left for her to give," (Laclos 305). So, I think him to be a seducer through and through and after he seduces Tourvel, others would agree with me too. Just getting to that point is the tricky part.

I had read a lot of seduction novels at the point when I read *Dangerous Liaisons*, so I had a pretty clear image of what the male seducer is. However, I may have misled myself into thinking I knew who Valmont is that others see him as in their critics of him. David McCallam writes that much of Valmont's, and Merteuil's, power over the other characters is that they are near omnipotent because they hold a lot of power over promises. It sounds strange, but it might be why I think Valmont is just a seducer. "In fact, on closer examination, it becomes clear that

promises are not made first, are not offered of their own accord… promises are ultimately a form of contract, they are not underwritten by the sincerity of the speaker but by the strength of desire of the other, the addressee, to hear them spoken," (McCallam 862, 863). If I ask the novel, "Will Valmont be the seducer I think him to be?", the novel would say, "I promise," which means I'm hooked into my belief of Valmont, I'm not leaving the book until I see it with my own eyes, and that is what the novel is supposed to do: make a promise that I need to see it happen because the novel doesn't speak and didn't promise me anything.

Letter 33, from Merteuil to Valmont, also has some insight into why it was taking a long time for Valmont to seduce Tourvel: "But your real mistake is to have allowed yourself to enter into correspondence with her. I defy you now to predict where this will lead. Are you by any chance hoping to prove to this woman by logic that she must give herself to you?" (Laclos 70). McCallam would argue that it is part of what Valmont wants out of this seduction: "Valmont, however, is more measured in his appreciation of the potential for betrayal inherent in a promise… [like him pursuing Tourvel when he said he leave her alone. This is a broken promise that] lead directly to the libertine's triumph," (861). After a while, it wears Tourvel down to the point where Tourvel "solicits his promises more than [Valmont] makes them of his own initiative; thus she is the ultimate guarantor of his vows not because she recognizes his honesty in them but because she longs to hear them," (McCallam 864). Valmont was waiting for her to break and be at his mercy before he would conquer her. He made the promises of leaving her alone, but he kept breaking the promise since Tourvel kept engaging in his letters.

Valmont is a character who seems to be a seducer through and through. Some critics might think he does have the capability for love, or more specifically be able to go into his feminine side and let the women he has around him be his equal since he sees and feels more

than what a man should. I do not think so. In Letter 76, when he warns Merteuil of the potential of his rival, Prévan, has on seducing her, I think Valmont is wavering in his confidence in Merteuil's ability to make herself seem like a person that can overcome a seducer. A rational woman with a strong self-control over her emotions may not be enough to stop a seduction, and Valmont might be thinking that Merteuil may just be another woman he has seen in the past, even in Tourvel before she fell to his seduction. Valmont is pulling his equal standing with Merteuil slowly away from her without her knowing until it's too late.

3. Merteuil: The Lady of the Full Deck

The Marquise de Merteuil is the more engaging character between her and Valmont. Hell, probably between her and the rest of the characters in the book. It comes from the fact that she seems so sure of herself and everything she does. Merteuil is "a self-made woman, her own creation, her own masterpiece, her own *oeuvre*," (Constantine xviii). It's a kind of confidence that not many women in this kind of literature, or any of the literature of the time that wasn't going to slander confident women, has and it felt refreshing in seeing it. It doesn't help that she's willing to sacrifice the innocent Cécile to Valmont just so Merteuil could get revenge on Cécile's intended, the Comte de Gercourt. But she does eventually get Valmont onto her side in this scheme of hers. And he'll willingly do it for her, once he gets close to endgame with his scheme with Tourvel.

Which is why Merteuil being near omnipotent, like Valmont, is so handy to have. David McCallam writes specifically about Merteuil and her "godlike" self in relation to her, and Valmont's, use of the letters first to make the letters into an embodiment of physical bodies (857), thus being able to manipulate the language in the letters that the write to each other, that

they copy from others, etc. (858), to create their "self-image; they come to self-possession in the time and space between the sex-act and its telling," (858). Merteuil's famous letter, 81, then describes how she manipulated her body to manipulating the minds and bodies of others (Laclos 859). In this special manipulation that she can do, letter 85 shows that Merteuil can help Valmont, should she think he would need some help. "You [Valmont] languish for away from the beautiful woman who obsesses you; one word from me and you find yourself at her side… Finally, in order to remove a redoubtable rival from the lists, yet again you summon me, and I grant your wish," (Laclos 195). Since they're still on friendly terms, it shows a friend trying to help another out, or it is a bit of gloating that Merteuil is the only one that can help Valmont since he does not seem to be making any progress. This idea that a woman like Merteuil being able learn self-control like a man and Valmont possibly giving into the feminine definition of feeling emotions and sensations show that the gender line is not as strong as what most of society, whether it is French in this instance or other Western nations like the United States, thinks it is. If using a series of promises that a man will be rational and has self-control while women are men's inferior opposite can be broken by the aristocracy that Merteuil can be rational and have self-control while Valmont is emotional and have no self-control, then the gender order is compromised. Merteuil is more of a man than Valmont. Then the question comes up about how she can do so. Certainly, she can't be that godlike to move everyone around as easily as if they were chess pieces. She does have a theory on how to make it work and, though it's a sad reality that she has to do this, she pulls it off well and it is her way of being her own woman in a world ruled by men.

In Letter 76, Valmont warns Merteuil of his rival, Prévan, and how Prévan is just as good of a seducer as Valmont is. "Prévan is actually a very likeable man, more likeable than you

[Merteuil] might suppose. In particular he has a knack, which is very useful to him, of involving everyone into the conversation, in everyone's hearing, at any opportunity. Only very few women do not fall into the trap of responding… Now, as you very well know, a woman who consents to discuss the matters of the heart soon ends up falling in love, or at least behaving as though she were," (Laclos 159). Valmont thinks that Merteuil will end up reverting back into a mindset of a woman she does not like and thinks she is not. Roy Roussel writes that both Merteuil and Valmont "have seen that the game played between men and women, which pits the male's power and mastery against the female's ability to provoke pleasure and feeling, is dictated by their conventional relationship rather than by their innate abilities and natures," (94). In turn, they "accept one another as equals, to become friends instead of opponents, and they converse with the cool and lucid detachment of people who have thoroughly examined their situation and long ago eliminated any grounds for disagreement," (94-95). Merteuil essentially must define what makes a woman and then make it her own. The definition of a woman comes from her feeling deep emotion and sensation, since women are the opposite of men and men aren't the ones that feel like that (99). Knowing that definition, Merteuil redefines it. By not letting herself feel emotion like a woman or hold back on showing sensation until a man releases it from her in sex (Roussel 99), Merteuil got the results she wanted. When she tried it out with her husband in letter 81, it formed "the unshakeable foundation of his blind trust in me," (Laclos 183). With that knowledge, she could test it out on other men (after her husband dies). Roussel writes that her seductions are "aimed precisely at this apparently natural inequality between the sexes… male/female, powerful/weak…," (99) and that she would subtly take the power out of the male's hands, emasculating him, and make him the one who feels emotions and experiences deep sensation that only Merteuil can fulfil (100-102). As an addition to this thought, Dawn Marlan

writes in her article, “The Seducer as Friend: The Disappearance of Sex as a Sign of Conquest in Les Liaisons Dangereuses,” that “[t]he extension of [deflowering or sexualizing a body] is the belief that one can also derive essences from formal states, that one can know a person through knowledge of the person’s body… [and that equating] sex and selfhood…rests on the importance of virtue to one’s self-conception,” (317). It all leads up to “[s]exual knowledge…can be understood as knowledge of a self and can therefore terminate seduction,” (317). If a person like Merteuil can control her body so that she can be the powerful one in bed than her male partner, she can’t lose herself.

Merteuil writes back to Valmont in Letter 85 of how she ruined Prévan’s reputation through her seduction of him at a gathering at her house. Merteuil had made a covert outward appearance for herself to remain a good and virtuous woman to the other characters so they wouldn’t see her true character before this encounter. “I did not doubt that Prévan would take advantage of the kind of rendez-vous I had just given him; that he would come early enough to find me alone, and that he would launch a strong attack,” (Laclos 198). Prévan does not know her true character as the others don’t at this point in time, so he pursues Merteuil as he would with any other woman. Merteuil lures Prévan to her bedchamber after the party and she springs her trap. “He [Prévan] wanted to enter into equal and close combat with me. But my extreme timidity baulked at this project… His [Prévan] rights being increased twofold [in having sex with Merteuil], he again became demanding. But then I [Merteuil] said: ‘Listen to me, until now you will have a pretty tale to the two [ladies] and a thousand others: but I am curious to know how you will recount the end of the affair.’ With these words I pulled on the bell with all my strength [and her servants came and caught Prévan in a compromising position in trying to do harm to Merteuil],” (Laclos 202). Merteuil proved to Valmont that she can deal with male seducers and

that she would come out unscathed from their encounters. But she is unaware that Valmont had lost confidence in her ability earlier, so this letter of victory for Merteuil is a hollow one since Valmont is breaking his promise in seeing Merteuil as an equal.

4. The Fallout of the Friendship of Valmont and Merteuil

The friendship of Valmont and Merteuil was a strange one because they treated each other as if they were on equal grounds that they can express themselves in their opposite sex's traits. If Valmont promises to let Merteuil look like a good, virtuous, and respected woman to the other characters, but act like a seducing man to him, then Valmont will respect her wishes in this regard. If Merteuil lets Valmont go after his conquest in Tourvel, and let him open up about possibly having more feminine feelings in this pursuit to her, then Merteuil can have the more masculine control she craves over others. For most the novel, Valmont and Merteuil were doing fine, being seducing chums, telling each other what they were up to and asking each other for advice and such. Then it crashed and burned at the end. In the end, Laclos is saying that this friendship cannot be achieved because the equality that Merteuil seeks is very dependent on Valmont's promise or contract that it their friendship will be equal. Equality depends on the will of men and not being equal with each other.

Roussel writes that after Valmont seduced Tourvel, he expected that he could go back to Merteuil and seduce her next (108-109). Which is what McCallam basically says about the fragility of their near omnipotence of being able to keep or break promises and that Valmont expected Merteuil to keep her promise to him when he gets to break his promise (861). In both cases, Merteuil won't stand for it and goes off to do her own thing. However, she gets blocked. Roussel writes that Merteuil ultimately relies on Valmont's acknowledgement of her being the

ironic, independent woman she thought and acted she was. Merteuil's seduction of Valmont's rival, Prévan, existed more in "her narration to Valmont and his reading of the true intention of her actions," (Roussel 111). Roussel also notes that although Merteuil could do whatever she wants in her silent, manipulative method, "her real desire is to be recognized as powerful, and for this she is dependent on Valmont for her pleasure as the most stupid woman in her world, who unquestioningly accepts the belief that her man is the source of her feeling and sensation," (112). Merteuil played herself in relying on Valmont's opinion too much. I think McCallam could agree with this thinking, but he might steer more into the fact that the patriarchal system comes back at the end of the novel because Valmont promises to the duel with Danceny at the end of the story since Danceny's manhood felt slighted by Valmont in aiding the ruin of Cécile and Danceny's relationship. Therefore, Valmont should die in the duel to set the patriarchal system back in order and have Merteuil be put in her place as a perverted and disgraced woman (868). There is no equality between the sexes in a patriarchy, and there is no equality in the aristocracy because of the patriarchy.

Ormond; or the Secret Witness

5. Brown and the Seduction Novel

Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810) lived an interesting life, a short one though. Brown was born into a family of Quakers which helped spark some of his writing interests. These include female education and equality among the sexes since Quakers had a long tradition of using everyone to help the community and women having an active participation in the religion (Barnard xi). Along with that, Brown was interested in the progressive writings that advanced better female education and equality (Barnard xv). This culminated in his first

published piece of writing, *Alcuin; A Dialogue* (1798). Although Alcuin follows in the footsteps of the progressive women's rights writers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, it does three things differently: it doesn't read like a lecture on women's rights (Barnard 254)[1], there should be something more androgynist to describe people than just the superior "masculine" way or the inferior "feminine" way of doing things (Barnard 254-255), and that abstract equality for women is not enough to change the belief society has in keeping them in their place and paper or revolution isn't going to solve that problem (Barnard 255). Some of these arguments from *Alcuin* make it into *Ormond* by the way of using a mostly capable female cast that can hold their own against whatever is thrown at them. They are as capable of taking care of themselves as they have a better position than most of the male characters. The male characters either need the females help or are destroyed by the females. The sexes have their stereotypical roles reversed.

It also helps that Brown isn't trying to lecture people on the capability of women in the novel. It's subtler than a lecture because *Ormond* is just one letter. A very long letter written by Sophia Courtland to an I. E. Rosenberg, whoever that may be. This one letter format is different from other seduction novels since it recounts the life, mainly, of Sophia's dear friend, Constantia Dudley. One person's life in an extended period of time in one letter. This focus on one person over an extended period gives readers the chance to see growth in that person. Even though the story is centered around the life and tribulations of Constantia, Sophia handles the telling of Constantia's story rather than talking of herself in more direct letters or correspondence between her and Sophia. As is with traditional epistolary novels, there are the back and forth of sending letters that examine their internal self and/or rely information to further the plot along. In

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1. Philip Barnard is one of the two editors for the edition of *Ormond* presented in this thesis (the other is Stephen Shapiro). Whenever Barnard's name comes up, he is a part giving introductory information as well as, presumably, giving the summary of *Alcuin* that comes after the main story of *Ormond*.

Ormond, however, Brown decides against the many letters and opens the world up to the readers. If this is a metaphor of trying to break free of the public and private spheres that started forming in this time, then it's very clever since Dangerous Liaisons and most other seduction novels stayed in the safety of a home or parlor, away from the public eye.

Although this is a small detail, I think it is interesting that this novel is named after the villainous seducer of the story. Of all the seduction novels/stories I have read, many of them have been named after the virtuous woman who would meet their ruin at the end of the novel. There are exceptions, *Dangerous Liaisons* being one of them, but the seduction novel from Brown is called *Ormond*. If we follow my thinking of the naming convention of seduction novels with the outcome of their endings, then it might have been a clear sign that Ormond the man was going to end up dead at the end of story. It does not give any indication on whether the women will come unscathed before Ormond dies, but having the character's name as the title of a seduction novel feels like the kiss of death to me.

From all of this, Brown is presenting the readers a chance to see how the adversities in Constantia Dudley's life affect her character as the story progresses. How she can overcome it on her own, by crossing gender roles into a masculine position of power, and will get help and relief from her dear friend, Sophia. It also shows how dedicated Sophia is to Constantia that she takes the time to write Constantia's life story out and show how good and strong of a person Constantia is to whoever Rosenberg is and to the readers of the novel. Brown is showing that a strong female friendship is possible, it is not the end of the world if the role of a man is not fully shown as long as the women have each other, and it integrates people into the republic more than having the shifting, fluid, and unstable kind of relationships that Laclos presents in *Dangerous Liaisons*. Or than just having women on their own without any friends.

6. Constantia Dudley: Son, yet Daughter and the Republican Dueler

The story of Constantia Dudley has many twists and turns, but it starts with the transgression of her father, Stephen Dudley. The beginning chapter starts out with Sofia giving Stephen's backstory. The main thing to take from the backstory is that if an American citizen acts like a British/European aristocrat in America, or that the citizen thinks himself to be too high to work or thinks he should be able to have an effortless way out of working, then there are going to be consequences to that citizen. Although it was near or the end of the American Revolution when Stephen was young, a citizen of the new American republic was still trying to define themselves. All they knew for sure is that they did not want to be like the corrupt European tyrants. So, whatever the opposite of that would be the American republican citizen. Stephen does not follow this very well. For Stephen's case, that consequence comes in his former business partner, a man name Craig. Stephen puts his complete confidence into Craig running his apothecary shop, so that Stephen is free to do whatever he wants, namely painting. Stephen leaned nothing useful or practical in case of a sudden fall in the social class and was not being interested in learning more useful skills. "There was little room for choice. His [Stephen's] habits had disqualified him for mechanical employments. He could not stoop to the imaginary indignity which attended them, nor spare the time necessary to obtain the requisite degree of skill," (Brown 6). It is why Stephen hired and eventually made Craig his business partner so Stephen could do the things he wanted while letting Craig do the work. So, a rule for thumb: never trust someone else with your money or livelihood, because if you don't know them well enough or think you do know them, they'll end up swindling you into paying their massive debt with your shop and savings, sending you and your family into poverty. Thus, Stephen was seduced by

Craig at the prospect of not having to work himself and letting someone else handle it for him. When Stephen realizes that he was seduced, it was too late. He was ruined like a woman; out of a good social standing and what it meant to be what he thought he was, which as an income providing husband/father/man. From this fall, Stephen then transforms into something more of a blind and melancholy widowed mother than a blind and bitter widowed man. Stephen falls from the gender role of a strong man into that of a weak and emotional woman. Without another male figure in the life of the Dudleys, it must be Constantia that steps up and take that masculine role in order to survive the life they now live.

Because of this fall from what her father used to be, Constantia would have to take up a mantel that might have been weird for another but sits decently on her. Even before Stephen's fall, the life of Constantia started out strange. Stephen marries a poor, orphaned European woman when he was abroad. With all the possibilities that Stephen had in finding a good republican woman to marry in America, it feels like a slap to the face of the new country that a native American would disregard marrying an American for a European woman after they just got done fighting against the oppressive European power (England). Then, Stephen decided to give Constantia all the education she could ever hope for, since most of that education was meant for sons. Constantia felt like she didn't fit in with the people of her social group before the fall either, probably because of the education she received. "She had learned to square her conduct, in a considerable degree, not by the hasty impulses of inclination, but by the dictates of truth. She yielded nothing to caprice or passion. Not that she was perfectly exempt from intervals of weakness…but these intervals were transient…She was no stranger to the pleading of love from the lips of others…but its tumults were brief, and speedily gave place to quiet thought and steadfast purposes" (Brown 16). But when she and Stephen dropped into poverty, Constantia had

to take on more roles to help her father, "[t]he infirmities of sex and age vanished before the motives to courage and activity flowing from her new situation…she began to deliberate with her father, the burthen of the common maintenance [of their new house], and blunt the edge of this calamity by the resources of a powerful and cultivated mind…" (18). And Constantia also figured that she could help with the expenses by making her own money. "Could she not by the employment of her hands increase the income as well as diminish the expense?... She came to a resolution. She was mistress of her needle, and this skill conceived herself bound to employ for her own subsistence," (18-19). Yes, needle work is more of a feminine job, but when Stephen goes blind and can't work, Constantia must take on getting the income on her own, as well as having to deal with two different landlords over rent of the Dudley's slum house. Constantia has taken up the responsibility a son would do in that situation. There are not many other virtuous women in other seduction novels that are as prepared to take on the world as Constantia is. Constantia is the real MVP.

It should be no surprise then that Constantia would have to defend herself against the monstrous seducer, Ormond. However, Ormond did not seem like a monster in the beginning. He is introduced into the story in chapter 9 after Craig tells him about the events that happened between him and Stephen and why Constantia was looking for him (she wants money from Craig so she and her household won't starve). Ormond then goes to a neighbor, just missing a leaving Constantia from the neighbor's house, and asks the neighbor his opinion of her. The neighbor tells Ormond that contradicts what Craig told Ormond, since Craig lied about those events, and Ormond does not believe in Constantia's virtuousness. He disguises himself later and learns, through disguise, that Constantia is virtuous and they start a friendship. Unlike the friendship between Valmont and Merteuil, Constantia thinks that this friendship could last with Ormond,

until he starts showing his true character with refusing to marry a girl name Hellen because without the marriage, Hellen's reputation would be ruined. Ormond would try to convince Constantia to marry him, but she refuses because of the Hellen problem. Eventually, Hellen kills herself since her reputation is ruined and she has nothing to live for at that point and Ormond becomes obsessed with Constantia to the point of trapping her in an estate that was returned to Constantia's possession after Hellen's death in chapter 28 (part of some property exchange between Constantia, Hellen, and Ormond). Defending herself with only a penknife, Constantia should be out of her league against a crazy seducer like Ormond. Constantia tells Ormond when he cornered her, "[k]now that my unalterable resolution is, to die uninjured. I have the means in my power. Stop where you are; one step more, and I plunge this knife into my heart," (216). Jan Lewis writes about the importance of the new friendship/partnership concept for marriage in America that values its citizens in finding a good mate: "American republicans sought the happy medium between—or, more precisely, a fusion of—passion and intellect, head and heart [sympathy for others and reason to show that the person can make logical and rational decisions]," (708). Constantia tries to reason with Ormond to not rape her because she has such a high sense of virtue in her that it should have made him stop. However, Ormond isn't a part of the republic, therefore he doesn't have to be a virtuous republican. Sophia writes in chapter 29 that Ormond visited a woman name Marinette, who was a woman of strong, near masculine qualities that came from France in trying to get away from the violence from the French Revolution. Marinette's heritage is "Greek of Cyprus… [and] Sclavonian of Ragusa," (Brown 144) so she is an outsider in American terms since she did not intend to become a full American citizen. Ormond visited Marinette to tell her that he was her long-lost brother that was separated from her when they were young, so Ormond is an outsider in America too sine he had no

intentions of becoming an American citizen either (Brown 221). Ormond did not have to play by the rules that the American republic wanted out of its people since Ormond did not belong with the American people. He was the wealthy seducer after the young, virtuous, and good republican in Constantia.

It is the weakness of the republic that since men had more power over their lives than the women, "[the republic] had no power over those who were not or did not want to be virtuous," (Lewis 720). And Constantia knows this too. "I know that to contend with your strength or your reason, would be vain," (Brown 216). Constantia, however, did not think that Ormond would rape her even if she kills herself (216), so now what was she supposed to do? Live and let Ormond rape her or kill herself and let Ormond rape her dead body? Neither. Like the good republican she is, despite being a woman who clearly doesn't know how to fight properly (because she's not a male who would learn that), Constantia defends herself against an adversary that has no honor, but her virtue and honor was on the line. So, stabbing and killing Ormond was the only way of saving herself. And it is why Constantia is lucky to have Sophia as a close friend because she's going to need someone to help her through this mess. With Sophia's help, Constantia does not have to rely on a man to help her out of a terrible situation because they have enough rationale, like men, to make competent thoughts and decisions.

7. Sophia (Westwyn) Courtland: Narrator and Defender

Out of the two friends, Sophia is the more interesting one to me. She is strange because she is not what most would think she should be. For instance, being the narrator of this story. A woman. Directly narrating a seduction novel. In 1799. It's unheard of, to say the least (even more unheard of since this isn't the typical epistolary novel). The closest novel that could be compared

to this might be Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797). It does have a seemingly strong female friendship between main female Eliza Wharton and her friend Lucy Freeman. However, the book is formatted as a traditional epistolary novel and Lucy is not a fan of Eliza's coquette lifestyle, so she's not as sympathetic and affirming of a confidant as what Sophia is to Constantia. Since *Ormond* reads more like a continental story, and that the story is written in one giant letter, someone must take the helm and wade through all the events of the story to make it as coherent as possible. That someone Brown decided was to be Sophia.

Then does that mean Sophia is just a disguise or a character cover-up for Brown to speak his true thoughts? There can be an argument made in that line of thought. When I first read the preface, or the "To I.E. Rosenberg" section just before chapter one, a particular line stuck out at me as a covert way of Brown telling his readers he's aware of why they're reading the novel: "You are anxious to obtain some knowledge of the history of Constantia Dudley. I am well acquainted with your motives, and allow that they justify your curiosity," (Brown 3). Other seduction novels have a preface in front of their stories that say something to the effect that "this novel is fiction, but heed the danger of seduction," so the author is telling their readers that the story might not have happened, but the author and the readers are aware that it could. The author is sticking their hand in making sure that the readers know they are there guiding the story for them to show them the evils of seduction and the triumph of virtue. However, I think Brown is letting Sophia be her own character. He doesn't try to slip himself into the affairs of these characters. Rather, it's more of letting them live out their lives as it happens. Sophia writes later in the preface that she writes this giant letter to "relate events in no artificial or elaborate order, and without that harmonious congruity and luminous amplification, which might justly be displayed in a tale flowing merely from invention. It will be little more than a biographical

sketch, in which the facts are distributed and amplified, not as a poetical taste would prescribe, but as the materials afforded me, sometimes abundant and sometimes scanty, would permit," (3-4). There are smaller moments when Sophia interrupts the flow of the narrative to add in her own commentary or to clarify something, like when Constantia was sick with yellow fever and the fear of getting sick and dying: "I [Sophia] will not recount that series of disastrous thoughts which occupied the mind of Constance during this period," (45), but she reveals herself as the narrator of the story in chapter 23. After that, she becomes more integrated into the story than just being a narrator.

And it is back to the main topic of the novel that might be the strangest thing about Sophia. The purpose of the novel is to give Constantia a defense against any slander that might come her way for, mostly, killing Ormond. Whoever I. E. Rosenberg is, a suitor most presume, is important enough to get the whole story of Constantia sent his way. Sophia's role in this is twofold: she is a reliable witness and defender of Constantia for her deed and that she is also demonstrating a political move. For the first, it would be detrimental if Constantia tried to write a letter explaining herself to Rosenberg because she is not in her right state of mind and that might lead to her confessing herself into a murder charge on her. Defending herself in this situation is not a promising idea, which is why Sophia took over for her. "A sufficient explanation has been given of the causes that led to it [the murder]. There were such as exempted my friend from legal animadversion," (Brown 220). For the second, Sophia has proved that she is competent enough to write this long, detailed, rational letter of the life of Constantia and all that happened to it and why the letter is necessary in the first place. The early American historian Joanne Freeman writes about the honor of politicians for this time in her book *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* and one of the things they used to keep or break their honor and reputation were

letters. “Personal letters,” Freeman writes, “were the most private paper weapon, though they became public all too easily,” (114). Sophia is putting her reputation out on the line for Constantia because she believes in the events that happened and that she does not want her friend to lose her reputation as well. “[E]ndorsed with ‘the authority of a name,’ a public-minded letter was a sworn statement of fact, the writer staking his [or her] honor on its veracity,” (Freeman114). Sophia signed her initials at the end of the preface letter to Rosenberg before chapter 1 and she reveals herself to be the narrator of the story in chapter 23, thereby signing her name and putting her stake down in defending Constantia. Although it’s unclear if this letter could get around to other people, knowing Sophia’s deep friendship she has with Constantia, she would let others read the letter too or let others know of the letter. And she makes it clear in the preface that if clarification is needed or to do some fact checking, that it was up to whoever reads the story to research the tale themselves. Sophia is doing what she can to make sure Constantia is presented in the best of light as possible so Constantia can survive this disaster in the future.

8. The Sister Friendship of Constantia and Sophia

In chapter 23 of the novel, Sophia says that she had lived with the Dudleys “from [her] infancy to [her] seventeenth year,” (Brown 172). Five paragraphs later, she says that she was “[a]t all hours and in every occupation, I was the companion of Constance. All my wants were supplied, in the same proportion as her’s. The tenderness of Mr. Dudley seemed equally divided between us. I partook of his instructions, and the means of every intellectual and personal gratification, were lavished upon me,” (173). To me, Sophia seems like the near sister of Constantia. If it weren’t for her blood being from other parents, they may have well of been natural, biological sisters. Their friendship is so deep from this time they had that I see their

friendship as a strong sisterhood, where they were going to be there for one another no matter what. It's because of the thought of them having a strong sister bond/deep friendship that I don't agree with Kristin Comment's claim in her article, "Charles Brockden Brown's 'Ormond' and Lesbian Possibility in the Early Republic," that their relationship is a romantic one. She makes a compelling argument that they are or could be, but I don't see it. For example, when Constantia and Sophia are reunited at the end of chapter 25 – "The succeeding three days, were spent in a state of dizziness and intoxication. The ordinary functions of nature were disturbed…" (191-192). - Comment pulls from this passage that there could be an "'unnatural' quality in the relationship [if they had homosexual intentions in the passage]," (64). If the people of America had anxiety about female friendships, it might come from that it could displace the role that men would have in their marriages to women. If a woman replaced the husband's role of confidant and companion of the wife, there would be no use for the husband to be in the marriage. However, I see it as Constantia and Sophia being so excited at seeing each other (Sophia thinking Constantia had died since the others Sophia talked to thought she was dead and Constantia finally having a constant friend to back her up and keep her company) that something like the description could happen between friends and sisters. It's more relief, excitement, and the need to reconnect that they kept to themselves for three days. They must bring themselves back up to speed in each other's lives so that they have the same knowledge to go from and that they are on equal footing again.

Another issue I have with Comment's suggestion about Constantia and Sophia possibly being lesbians is that I'm not sure how close of a line they walk on towards androgyny. I have an image in my mind that they seem like they're more feminine looking and act more in line of a female than being that close to androgyny. Comment's article does point out that the most

androgynous character is the seemingly exotic Martinette because she does go between regularly dressing as both sexes and has participated in fighting in two revolutions and liked the fighting. Again, anxieties are raised in this outsider of a woman in Martinette that comes into America and might be tempting to take Constantia away from her role in being a wife to an American man since Martinette has the traits and strength of a man while being a woman. What use is there in a man if an androgynous figure like Marinette is around to not only be able to defend herself but have an equal standing friendship (or something more sexual) and be a better companion to someone like Constantia than what a man could? If there were more Martinettes, then there would be no need for men. I agree with Comment that "[w]hile both Constantia and Sophia display characteristics associated with masculinity (independence, rationality, good business sense), neither violates the culture's fundamental notions of womanhood to the same degree [as Marinette does]," (67). Maybe what's tripping me up. I see the two women, Constantia and Sophia, as a kind of reflection of what women are in our modern time. I don't think of being an androgynist female myself, but to the people of the late eighteenth century, I might be to them because I don't dress in a feminine manner. Although Constantia and Sophia don't go that far in dressing more like a man as Martinette does, these traits that Comment described, independence, rationality, good business sense, they sound like something that many modern women have in them. So, I associate them as being an image of what women would become in our modern standards.

Another thing that trips me up is I think Constantia may be more of an asexual character. This thinking of mine comes from this thought I had early in reading *Ormond* as I thought that Constantia's educated, practical, and more masculine self may have made her more into an asexual character than a lesbian character. "She [Constantia] had exercised her judgement on his

[first potential suitor for marriage] upon his character [wealthy but immature], and had not been deceived…," (Brown 17). After dealing with not wanting any of the suitors that come to her, Constantia could feel dispassionate in trying to find a good republican husband to be her companion than being a slave-wife to her master-husband. Sophia has with her super chill husband that lets her do whatever she wants whenever she wants (Brown 176-178). Plus, after the mess she had Ormond, she really wouldn't be looking for a husband to have that sexual drive in him since she's going to be scarred from that experience for a long time (whether she knows it or not).

It's this thinking that Constantia is more of an asexual character that I didn't pick up on lines or descriptions that Kristin Comment points out as being more romantic in nature or a homosexual attraction than my thinking of it being admiration, as I see Constantia has for Martinette when they really get to talk to each other or Sophia has for Constantia fighting through her hardship while Sophia was gone. Comment writes that the scene where Constantia sold her father's lute to Marinette to get some money and had the threat of being rape come from the ruffians in the alley are "'punishment' for [her] transgressive desire [to have Martinette as a sexual partner and society doesn't want that to happen]," (72). If Constantia is more of an asexual character, she probably would have still been harassed by the ruffians. If put into context of what that might mean, it could go two ways: the possibility of rape for Constantia shows social anxieties about the country not moving onto the next generation because women don't want to cooperate with the republican marriage since they don't want or desire sex. Or it is because Constantia has so much republican virtue in her that she must go through the hardships and see that these men (ruffians and suitors) trying to get to her do not have republican virtue in them, it's not worth Constantia's time with trying to get them on the right path. Jan Lewis does

writes that a good republican wife doesn't deny their sexuality, rather, they use it "to tempt men to be good," (701). "Once she [the wife] had seduced him [the husband] into virtue, the married woman's task was to preserve her husband in the exalted stat to which her influence had raised him," (701). There isn't much Constantia could do, married or not, to put these men on the right republican path, so there's no hope for them. As for Sophia, she is more interested in being with her sister/friend than having a romantic relationship with her.

The friendship between Constantia and Sophia means that they are not alone in the new republic and most of the men does not seem to offer much comfort to the women. They must stick together to survive the separation they have when Sophia goes to Europe and Constantia stands in the rubble of her father's economic and social ruin. They have the strength to cross gender roles to keep each other safe and able to stay at each other's side. Also, the republic is not ruined or is not destroyed by the lack of men controlling the situation in the lives of these women, so there should not be all this fear that men's roles will be erased and then the republic would be destroyed without men. The republic is fine and the women are fine because of their friendship.

Conclusion

These novels were weird. They focus more on the friendships more than the seduction itself, or the morality that needs to be addressed to prevent the seduction from happening. They focus on how the main characters in *Dangerous Liaisons* and *Ormond* cross over their gender roles to go into the other. Men being more feminine, women being more masculine. It shows that sometimes friendships between a man and a woman, in the case of *Dangerous Liaisons*, can be sustainable for a long while and be a strong connection, until the man – Valmont – starts

asserting himself as a man again and that the woman – Merteuil – should be submissive to the man as a normal woman should. And Merteuil fights against it this notion until the Valmont plays his hand in ruining Merteuil's constructed reputation by releasing their letters to the public and Merteuil is then brought down lower than a normal woman's status and the friendship is thus destroyed. Valmont and Merteuil ostracized themselves from getting into a close relationship with other characters so that their friendship could be strong, but when their gender dynamics get in the way, they ostracize each other until there is no more friendship. On the other hand, *Ormond* shows how strong and deep Constantia and Sophia's female friendship is to the point that nothing can crush it, only reinforce it. It brings the women power within themselves to survive the anxieties and uncertainties of everyday life. Still, these novels are strange in the time they were written in since it didn't happen very often. Constantia and Sophia have a strong friendship that has been with them since the beginning of their lives. Their friendship goes to show that despite the odds stacked against Constantia, Sophia will have her back as a gender defying political move on whoever I. E. Rosenberg is and why they inquired about her. Sophia's narration proves that she is capable of being a rational being without a male figure to help her and that it was ahead of the time. Constantia proved that she also could handle herself since she had all the terrible things happen to do, but she overcame them because of the advanced education she received and that her more masculine traits helped her navigate an uncertain world. There is a chance that women can have a strong and meaningful friendship that men claim they have with each other and it's not possible for women to have. While the men don't have a large rule in the women's lives, it does not seem to matter to the women as long as they have their friendship. Friendship has power to bring people together or to destroy them. It just depends on the participants in the friendship on how they want to go about it.

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